

A Public Faith
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
February 26, 2023-PM Service
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Acts 19:23-41

About a month ago, in a sermon I mentioned that sometimes as they prepare for their public profession of faith, a candidate will ask, “*Why do I have to profess my faith in public? Why do I have to go out in front of everyone? Why Can’t I complete my church school classes, tell the elders I love Jesus and be admitted to full membership?*” It’s a good question. There’s more than one answer to this question. In my sermons from a month ago I said that it has to do with showing a heart commitment as well as a head commitment. But another really important answer to the question is this: *we make you do this in public because Christianity is a public faith.* It is not simply a private feeling or a personally held belief, Christianity is something that shapes your whole public life-your thoughts and words and deeds, everything.

It would have been much simpler in some ways for the early church if this weren’t so. It would have been easier for the church of Acts if their faith could have been something they could have left in the private sphere. It would have been easier if they would have stuck to praying together in private, celebrating the Lord’s Supper together, taking care of each other’s needs, enjoying each other’s company. They could have saved themselves a lot of persecution and dislocation.

But right from the very first day, right from the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit pushes the church to go public. Peter and the rest of them receive the Holy Spirit, and what does the Spirit cause them to do? They leave the home where they are staying and head for the temple and start publically preaching the gospel. Chapter 5 tells us that this became an everyday practice for the apostles, every day they stood in the temple and proclaimed: ‘Jesus is Lord! Be baptized!!’ They healed people and drew large crowds. It drove the temple leaders crazy. It got them thrown in jail. Or think of Stephen. Going public got him in trouble too. He was ordained as a deacon-to help take care of the widows in the church, but he didn’t confine his work there, he went out into the city and spoke against the temple. It got him stoned to death. If he’d just stuck to the widows that would never have happened.

In our passage the church again makes public waves-not only in the area of religion, they start creating economic and political waves. Paul is walking around the city of Ephesus proclaiming the good news of Jesus. But he’s doing more than that. He’s proclaiming that man-made gods-like the great Artemis whose temple dominates the city-are not gods at all. They’re just hunks of wood and stone. This is dangerous. This is like going to Detroit and preaching against automobiles. It’s like going to Napa Valley and preaching against wine. Artemis and her temple are everything in Ephesus. The temple silversmiths are enraged at this message. Demetrius is angry at his loss of

business. And he sounds a dire warning about the effect of this message on the political economy of the great city of Ephesus. 'If Artemis is nothing than this whole city is nothing. These people are threats to social stability!!!' And before you know it, Paul's public faith starts a riot big enough to fill a 25,000 seat theater and almost gets a couple of his traveling companions killed.

I wouldn't say that the early church was obnoxious or confrontational or looking for a fight. They weren't hoping to get arrested. They weren't hoping to start riots. They were simply public with their faith. They lived and spoke their faith in the world because that's what the Holy Spirit prompted them to do. Christianity is not a private faith. It is, in the words of Acts 17:6 a faith that turns the world upside down. It is a public faith.

Thinking about our faith being a public faith of course raises some questions. When we think of our faith as a public faith, a faith to be lived out in the world, do we mean that we are called to be political activists? Is that the meaning of a public faith? Well, Christians are certainly called to be involved in politics, and in our church there is a proud history of people engaged in the political sphere as individuals. That's good. But that is not the work of the church as an institution. That's not our sphere. It's interesting, Jesus and the apostles had a public faith that definitely impacted the empire and got the attention of political leaders, but that all happened without them making political proclamations. They never offered direct political critiques. They never called for authorities to change laws or policies. Instead they practiced what James Davidson Hunter calls '*Faithful Presence.*' That's a term that comes from his 2010 book, *To Change the World*. He uses it to describe the public posture of the church. The early church practiced faithful presence. They embodied the gospel through their community of love and care and proclamation.

There were all sorts of issues in the society of that day that the early church *could* have spoken out against. For example, slavery was an oppressive institution. Lots of slaves suffered terribly under cruel and oppressive masters. And yet none of the church leaders ever decried the institution of slavery, or called for its abolishment. While Jesus and the disciples were alive, the practice of exposing babies was common. If you didn't want a child, didn't like its gender, or if the child had a disability, it was perfectly acceptable to leave the child out in the wilderness to die. An abominable practice. Jesus and the disciples never spoke out against that practice. Never called for laws against the practice.

Instead of marching on picket lines against these evils, the early church embodied a different kind of life. They practiced faithful presence. Jesus paid close attention to the marginalized and the poor in the outsiders, he welcomed them, he took time for the beggars and the children. He embodied a community of care for the weak. His care stood in sharp resolution against the abuses of slavery and exposure. Same with Paul. There's a story in Acts 16 where Paul heals a slave girl in Philippi. He didn't do it as some kind of political protest. She was possessed by a spirit which allowed her to do some fortune telling. She

made a lot of money for her owners that way. Paul cast out that evil spirit, not as a political statement about slavery, but because he didn't like to see another person oppressed. Because it messed with the bottom line of the slave owners, the miracle got him thrown in jail. Paul wasn't being political, he was just modeling faithful presence, he was just living a public faith, and inevitably that public faith starts to shake the foundations of an evil institution like slavery. Jesus and his followers embodied a different way of living rather than a direct political challenge changed people's attitudes.

The early church did the same thing in the area of exposure of children. Early Christians rescued babies that had been exposed and cared for them as their own. That brought shame to the practice, and eventually caused the empire to change laws. Throughout history the church has been most effective, and the message of the Gospel has been most clearly heard when The message of the gospel has been combined with a church that has a faithful public presence.

That works on a personal level as well. This is a minister example, but it applies to any individual. It's a commonly observed fact that a ministers preaching effectiveness is directly related to whether or not he or she is a faithful presence. I've heard lots of stories (and I'll bet you have too) of ministers who came to a church and we're just okay preachers. They were solid. They were faithful. But they did not dazzle. Nevertheless, these ministers were excellent pastors who showed up in people's pain and who did the hard gritty work of loving the sheep. They practiced faithful presence. As a result, the people start to hear the preaching in a new way. The faithful presence of the minister makes them more attentive and more open to his ordinary presentation of the gospel and through the power of the Holy Spirit, their hearts are changed. Our witness is always stronger when it is combined with faithful presence. Indeed, I will tell you, that one of my great fears as a minister of a big church like LaGrave is that I will concentrate too much on articulate presentation of the gospel, and not enough on faithful presence. That would be bad.

I think faithful presence is our best hope for witness in a world which is currently pretty cynical about Christianity, and opposed to a lot of what we stand for. Back in 2010 Nicholas Kristof, who was an op-ed writer for the New York Times, and someone who is most definitely not a Christian, wrote an article in which he admitted that well he used to be very cynical about Evangelical Christians. That changed when he saw what some of these devout Christians were doing in some of the hardest and poorest places of Africa. He told stories of priests and missionaries who lived in the poorest of poor places, living in hard conditions, caring for profoundly broken people, and doing it not for personal gain but for the love of those people, and for the love of God. These people practiced faithful presence, and that made Kristof curious about this faith that drove them. In a later op-ed he wrote this. "I'm not particularly religious myself, but I stand with all of those I've seen risking their lives in this way and it sickens me to see that faith mocked at New York cocktail parties." That's the power of faithful presence.

Kristof is moved and his heart warms to Christians because of what he sees. The Silversmiths of Ephesus have a different reaction. We have to recognize that if we practice faithful presence in our culture we will get moth reactions. Nevertheless, the call of the New Testament is clear: To witness to our Lord not just through words, and certainly not just through blog posts and YouTube videos that declare our positions and decry the positions of the world. We are called to faithful presence, to embody the gospel in word and deed.

And measuring success of our efforts? That's hard to do in the short term. In the short term in Ephesus, faithful presence seems to be a failure. It turns the whole city against the church. But consider this: Two defenders of Artemis speak about the church in this passage, and comment on how much of a public threat it is. There's Demetrius who is worried that the church is going to totally transform their city. He's the one who really hates Paul and the gospel. And then there's the clerk, the reasonable one, who says, "don't worry about it, the church is no threat." The whole world knows about Artemis and her image that fell from heaven. Artemis is secure. Who ends up being right? Demetrius may be the bad guy in the story, but he's right. Eventually Jesus will replace Artemis in this city. No one worships Artemis anymore, and Jesus is everywhere. Measuring success and results is important and we need to do it, but when we do it, especially in the short term, we can't let our human measurements eclipse the wild and eternal power of the living God. Our God has always taken his people's faithfulness and turned it into something good and fruitful. Throughout the Bible God takes small actions of ordinary people and makes them into more than we could ask or imagine. All our faithful presence is practiced in the light of his power, his grace and his majesty.

As individuals and as a community we are meant to be out there. We're meant to be public. We are sailboats and we're not meant to be docked in our slip all the time, spending all our time having our brass polished and our teak oiled and our decks shined. We are meant to be out on the water, out on the waves, with the wind snapping our sails. It's a more dangerous place to be, it requires more energy, but it's where we belong. And if, sometimes we feel unsatisfied in our faith. We feel antsy as if something's not quite right, something's missing. Maybe that discomfort is God working on us. Maybe that antsy feeling is the Holy Spirit pushing you, He's blowing on your sails and saying, "Come on! It's time to get out of the harbor. Let's go! Let me take you on a great adventure-the great adventure of public faith."

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